



## Harvesting the Past: The Social Mobilization of Bolivia's Indigenous Peoples[1]

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### Introduction

Along with the rise of identity politics, ethnic, and indigenous groups have increasingly organized under their own banner, in the process limiting the state's realm of maneuver. Is this an inevitable process, reflecting essential, stable identities? Is the ascendancy of indigenous groups in countries such as Bolivia inevitable? If so, why now and not sooner?

The rise of indigenous groups was not just a matter of elites relaxing control or forming alliances with lower classes. This occurred on previous occasions. Further, it was not just a question of organization and leadership. Indigenous groups have been organized and led by their own since well before the arrival of the Spanish. Sufficient resources had to be available, a certain level of organization had to be achieved, and indigenous leaders had to understand the dynamics of their environment in order to realize and act upon real and potential political opportunities.

This article argues that the ascendancy of Bolivia's indigenous groups during the last decades of the twentieth century was the result of their transformation into networked social movements. This transformation provided indigenous groups with the resources and tools necessary to increase their ability to organize, coordinate, and communicate (domestically and internationally) in such a way that generated leverage which could be used against the state and its international supporters. Examining the rise of indigenous groups through political economy and social movement methodologies explains this phenomena, and sheds light on the relationship between structure and agency.

### Actors, Interests and Frame

The rise of indigenous power in the last half of the twentieth century is often described as the emerging heyday of Bolivia's indigenous movement. Although it was markedly stronger during this period, it is premature and artificial to understand Bolivia's indigenous organizations as a unitary group.[2] As James C. Scott concluded in his work on revolutions, the true nature of revolution or opposition parties can be more precisely understood if they are seen as groups—

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with some shared interests—that build alliances upon one another to achieve specific goals.[\[3\]](#) This understanding reinforces the idea that explaining outcomes using the political economy method is not just about resulting policy, but also about what happens to the relationships and alliances that were initially formed around specific interests. Closer scrutiny of Bolivia's ethnic *movement* reveals the existence of numerous groups with different interests, perceptions of identity, and approaches to dealing with the state.

Mining and urban workers immediately formed unions under the broad banner of the *Central Obrera de Bolivia* (COB) following the 1952 revolution, but rural Indians continued to remain outside the state fold. An armed rural peasantry, combined with the weakness of the state, enabled indigenous groups to continue practicing local governance and communal land use. The urban—rural divide was exacerbated by Quechua and Aymara leaders who, because of their dissatisfaction with the established political parties and differences with the COB, broke away during the 1970s to form their own interest groups.

In the face of the waning mining industry in the 1980s, the Government of Bolivia reduced the scale of the state-directed mining concern, *Corporacion Minera de Bolivia*, in favor of agriculture. Over twenty thousand miners—three quarters of the mining workforce—were let go, and they migrated to both urban and rural areas.[\[4\]](#) This immediately reduced the importance of mining unions and thrust the rural peasant groups to the forefront of indigenous opposition politics. Within the cities, the CSUTCB replaced miners as the dominant group within the COB.

Infighting among the remaining mining unions also contributed to the shift of power towards the peasant groups. At the beginning of this period, miner-based opposition groups framed their contention in terms of class conflict. This was a product of previous ties with the Left, and gained prominence because of the proximity of mining groups to centers of state power (Sucre and La Paz). Bolivia's rural indigenous population framed its struggle in terms of indigenous identity. No longer were assaults on the indigenous population by the state purely economic; rather, they became attacks on the very foundation of indigenous culture and heritage. This image was used to reinforce arguments against neo-colonialism and economic liberalization.

Bringing indigenous groups together got off to a slow start. In 1992, ethnic groups from throughout Bolivia descended on La Paz to hold the first “National Assembly of Peoples.” The purpose of the assembly was to reach a consensus on indigenous goals and agree upon a plan to pursue them. However, the assembly failed due to suspicion and distrust of one another among the groups.[\[5\]](#)

Domestic indigenous frames were reinforced by regional ethnicity-based social movements throughout the latter half of the 1900s. Ethnicity-framed (but not necessarily generated or led) social movements produced violent insurgent groups, such as the *Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru* in Peru and the *Tupamaros* in Uruguay. In Ecuador, indigenous groups played a significant role in the January 2000 coup d'etat. In Brazil, indigenous groups, with some radical offshoots, developed into the *Movimiento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or Landless Workers' Movement. These ethnicity frames have been amplified by the proliferation of international human, indigenous, and labor rights organizations.

In the midst of this ethnic resurgence, greater emphasis was placed on the cultural importance of coca. While it had always been used in traditional religious ceremonies, as well as for reducing the physical effects of hunger, high altitude and exhausting work, indigenous groups began to re-emphasize its sacred significance. Where once coca eradication had jeopardized only the livelihoods of those who relied on its cultivation for trade, it now was now framed as an assault on a specific people and their historical identity. These frame shifts allowed Bolivia's indigenous groups to present an image with which international audiences could more easily sympathize.

Despite the success of peasant unions, they failed to capture the support of all of Bolivia's indigenous groups. Just how groups would be represented continued to be divisive; the CSUTCB tended to view differences in terms of *indigena* and *blanco*, and it assumed that all *indigenas* shared similar interests. Could a majority peasant group adequately represent minority indigenous groups that saw differences among ethnicities? And, could it represent groups that were not associated with, or interested in, traditional labor unions?<sup>[6]</sup> How could ethnic peasant organizations that recognized the authority of the state represent those who refused to identify themselves as citizens?

The Indians of Bolivia's eastern lowlands continued to remain removed from the state, as well as other domestic indigenous movements. The CSUTCB failed in its attempt to bring the eastern Indians into the union because<sup>[7]</sup> the latter realized that they would always be a minority group within the CSUTCB.<sup>[8]</sup> Eastern Indians were not interested in integration into the state, and instead preferred to operate outside the CSUTCB and to limit their goals to local autonomy and dignity issues.<sup>[9]</sup> However, the lessons of strength derived from presenting an organized and unified front were not lost on the eastern peoples. They created their own indigenous groups—*Confederacion Indigena del Oriente Boliviano* (CIDOB), *Central de Pueblos Indigenas del Beni* (CPDB), and *Asamblea del Pueblo Guarani* (APG)—to represent their interests and remain separate from traditional political parties, or indigenous groups tightly aligned with these political parties.

Several hundred domestic and international NGOs operate in Bolivia.<sup>[10]</sup> NGOs began to emerge in Bolivia by the 1960s, however, they did not begin to gain traction for nearly thirty years. The right-leaning state and left-leaning NGOs (which comprised the majority) had generally opposed one another for influence in Bolivia. Government corruption tied to left-wing NGOs paved the way for neoliberal NGOs (e.g., USAID) to expand in Bolivia as the people and the state reacted against the left.<sup>[11]</sup> The boost that created the nexus of indigenous movements and NGOs came in 1994 when the senate approved Law 1551, the Law of Popular Participation (LPP). This law created a new relationship for accountability and oversight of local areas—mostly those where the state exercised less influence or had weakly penetrated—and it empowered new *organizaciones territorial de base* (Territorial Base Organizations) to deal directly with NGOs. Essentially, the state ceded some of its own authority to organize and develop remote communities directly to NGOs.<sup>[12]</sup>

Funding for some NGOs has been intermittent. Bolivia specifically had been the target of European NGOs until the mid-1990s. During the Balkan Wars, Eastern Europe took center stage and diverted NGO resources, aid, and foreign investment that had traditionally been earmarked for Bolivia.<sup>[13]</sup> European NGOs and donors often target their support to the poorest nations in the world. In this case, Bolivia routinely competed with African nations experiencing the direst of conditions, making NGO support sporadic.<sup>[14]</sup> Finally, even major supporters like the United States change their priorities and reallocate funds accordingly (e.g., support for Plan Colombia). Like other donors, U.S. aid is also conditional; Bolivia's eligibility for aid is tied to counter-narcotic efforts. Regardless, the continued presence of NGOs in Bolivia has provided indigenous groups with alternatives to state development programs that have increased their political maneuver space.

## Groupings

Indigenous groups' alliances during this period can be described in terms of both internal and external groupings. Some continued to join existing political parties, but others began to develop their own political organizations to ensure that their interests were properly represented. In turn, larger indigenous interest groups began to interact with one another, but they did not coalesce into a single, unified movement.

In western and central Bolivia, instead of joining political parties, these groups also began to create their own. They organized themselves around ethnicity, and then developed politically from this base.[\[15\]](#) During the 1970s, indigenous groups began to split with the leftist parties with which they had previously been associated. Internationally, indigenous leaders like Evo Morales began to establish ties with international indigenous rights movements and sympathetic governments. This section outlines the mechanisms by which groups attempted to cultivate movements by looking at mobilization structures, resources, and repertoires of collective action.

The focus of effort for indigenous resource mobilization was directed mostly towards improving organizational efficiency, coordinating mechanisms, and alliance development among the various indigenous groups. In terms of social movement development, existing structural conditions favored mobilization. First, assembly was not prohibited by the state, so the population could come together in existing communal and public spaces. Indigenous control of the countryside contributed to this. Second, the population was already organized along traditional, communal and trade union lines, so no new structures necessarily had to be developed. Rather, existing structures had only to be modified and directed. Coordination across geographic boundaries was facilitated by the proliferation of communication technologies, specifically cell phones and the internet, in the 1990s.

Indigenous self-reliance also supported the development of social movements. Indigenous dependence on the state was limited, and was further reduced by indigenous ties to non-state actors like NGOs and, to some extent, the underworld via illicit narcotics trafficking.[\[16\]](#) The transactions that describe the quality of these relationships vary. Links with the former resemble a semi-sustained transnational advocacy relationship, whereas links with the latter resemble transnational, temporary political exchange.[\[17\]](#)

Membership alone is not enough to demonstrate the existence of a social movement. A group may be composed of members whose families share a direct indigenous lineage, but without collective contentious action (in this case, based on ethnic identity), the group is not a social movement. Leites and Wolf explain the difference between preferences and behavior as the supply and demand of opposition.[\[18\]](#) A group may identify itself with a certain cause, exhibiting preferences for change (demand). However, the group does not become a social movement until it begins to organize for the purposes of sustained action, that is to say, to exhibit behavior (supply). The supply side takes inputs and converts them into outputs that are aimed at expanding the movement and producing change. The conversion mechanism, or social movement infrastructure, organizes people and resources, and generates outputs such as peaceful or violent demonstrations, services, publicity, etc. Within social movement theory, these outputs comprise a group's repertoire.

The primary forms of collective action among Bolivia's indigenous groups have been peaceful but disruptive demonstrations and blockades. These often begin with marches that originate in rural areas, cover dozens to hundreds of miles, and culminate with the protesters descending on the capital. An example of this was the 1990 "March for Land and Dignity." Over thirty-five days, around 700 demonstrators walked from Trinidad to La Paz (over 400 miles through the rainforest and the Andes) to demand legal rights to traditional lands. This action gained the support of Quechua and Aymara groups, and resulted in a presidential decree that prevented logging on certain tribal lands in the Beni Department.[\[19\]](#)

These marches and demonstrations typically produce two immediate results. First, because the marches occur over several days, they are sure to catch the attention of both local and international media. Second, because there are only two major routes into La Paz, the marches begin to disrupt traffic and commerce long before the protesters actually reach the capital.

The level of violence exhibited by demonstrators is generally proportional to that exercised by the state, and it is generally limited to rock throwing and some vandalism. The level of violence

associated with an event is also a function of time; demonstrations do not begin with violence, but are generally the result of escalating tension towards a tipping point; for example, when police forces resort to violence to disperse crowds. However, because demonstrations are often scheduled for a specific period, and planned and coordinated among the various groups, protestors often disperse without significant violence.

Deliberate violence was not completely absent from the repertoire. *Cocaleros* in the Chapare conducted violent campaigns when the GOB systemized its forced eradication campaign in the late 1990s. During this period, militant *cocaleros* took up crude arms to ambush *machateros* (eradication forces). They also began to construct improvised explosive devices to mine the helicopter landing zones used by eradication units.[\[20\]](#)

## Decision-Making Structures

Prior to 1994, access of Bolivia's indigenous population to the national government was mostly limited to the alliances it could form with major political parties like the MNR, and indigenous interests were, at best, limited to local politics where they were the majority. By 2004, indigenous leaders comprised one-third of Bolivia's congressional representatives and nearly two-thirds of Bolivia's municipal mayorships.[\[21\]](#) In rural areas, groups have created self-rule *organización democrática rotativa* (rotating democratic organizations).[\[22\]](#) Unlike Western governing systems' prominence of professional politicians, participation in community assemblies is perceived as a local "civic" duty and leadership is shared among heads of household.[\[23\]](#)

Decision-making structures alone are not significant without political opportunity. While some creations of political maneuver space are obvious, whether or not a political opportunity exists is often only understood *ex post facto*. What makes the exploitation of space even less certain is that three things must occur. First, an opposition group must correctly interpret the situation. Second, it must develop a realistic, feasible plan and marshal the resources to execute it. Third, it must properly execute the plan. Even at this point, success is not guaranteed because the interaction between opposition and majority is both iterative and mutually influencing. Each shape one another's perception of events and courses of action.

Actions can be taken to create political opportunities. However, whether or not proactive measures are successful rests in large part on multiple variables. Social movement and revolutionary theory literature have demonstrated how movements build on one another, and also how they take advantage of existing structures and relationships.[\[24\]](#) It takes time to generate frames that provide enough resonance to spur action. Furthermore, in the absence of the complete exclusion of political parties, opposition movements are less likely to rebel against the state. Latin America's world-famous historical example of one who failed to understand these dynamics was Ernesto "Che" Guevara. He assumed that he could jump-start revolution in Bolivia, which had its rebellion against colonialism ten years earlier. The oppression frame he attempted to inspire his targeted population with failed to resonate. This, combined with his failure to learn the proper lessons from the Cuban Revolution, ultimately led to his failure to "resonate."

Bolivia's indigenous population took advantage of three types of political opportunities during this period. First, they created their own opportunities through mass mobilization aimed at paralyzing transportation within major cities, and along the trans-Bolivia highway. Terrain control was significant because it was a scalable repertoire. Groups could shut down a single city, or the entire country. As mentioned above, indigenous groups also created political opportunity by reducing their dependency on the state.

Second, they took advantage of the devolution or shifts of power among elites. Even more so than in the past, elites seeking control of the state could only take control with the tacit approval

of Bolivia's rural indigenous population. This was a function of creating a powerful base that could not only oppose other elites, but other lower class factions, as well.

Third, indigenous groups combined alliance building and bandwagoning to increase their mass and generate greater momentum. Similar interests provided the basis for alliances, but often groups with dissimilar interests or visions came together; this is what Kevin Healy has termed "reciprocal protest-action."<sup>[25]</sup> Indigenous groups often had various visions of the state and what should be done about it. Groups like the *Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti* (Pachakuti Indigenous Movement) sought a violent revolution. Others, like the *cocaleros* of the MAS party sought changes within the government, while some fought for changes to a specific policy. When larger opposition groups were planning to strike, which could essentially shut the country down for up to a week, other single-issue groups would join the demonstration with the hope of tacking their issues onto the major grievances.

## Outcomes

Revision to Bolivia's constitution in 1994 declared the Republic to be "multiethnic" and "pluricultural."<sup>[26]</sup> In accordance with the Law of Popular Participation (or law of decentralization), the state formally recognized peasant authority through the legal creation of the territorial base organizations and the *campesino sindicatos*, and it extended the authority of municipalities. These grassroots organizations were also given the authority to provide budget oversight for municipal government developmental programs.<sup>[27]</sup>

The Agrarian Reform Law of 1994 amended the 1953 version of the law. The purpose of the latter was to try and incorporate rural indigenous peoples into the state by granting communal lands to them as peasants. The new law specifically acknowledged the ownership of communal lands by indigenous groups.<sup>[28]</sup> Thus, land ownership based on class identification now became land ownership based on indigenous identity.

Between 2002 and 2003, President Sanchez de Lozada undertook reforms to further privatize Bolivia's natural gas industry, which ultimately resulted in his resignation. His efforts met with rampant protest from indigenous groups along a number of lines. First, groups preferred to nationalize the industry; the tax structure aimed at encouraging foreign direct investment that had been established as part of the 1985 shock therapy had produced little actual income for Bolivia. Second, opposition groups detested the idea of exporting natural gas through Chile. Bolivia's loss of its coastal territory to Chile in 1880 as a result of the War of the Pacific served as a rallying cry for nationalism. This is significant because it is one of the few times that indigenous groups actually identified themselves as *Bolivians*. Third, the events served as catalyst for a host of other demands that were thrown into the mix. These included demands for social reformation, expansion of state services, and even a reversion to a pre-sixteenth century Aymara Kingdom (*Kallasayu*).<sup>[29]</sup>

Following Goni's resignation, Vice President Carlos Mesa was elevated to the presidency and made immediate concessions to diffuse the standoff. He agreed to hold a referendum on the future of Bolivia's natural gas industry, take steps towards the creation of a constituent assembly, and postpone eradication in the Chapare while it was being surveyed to determine how much land could be used for legal coca cultivation.

## Conclusion

By 2004, Bolivia's indigenous groups had developed unprecedented power. Although they did not occupy the highest government posts, the state could, in fact, do little without at least the tacit approval of the indigenous organizations. Bolivia's indigenous groups achieved this through a combination of recognized and self-generated political opportunities, by developing frames that

legitimated common and dissimilar interests, and by taking advantage of existing social structures and spaces to mobilize collective action. These actions helped increase the quality and quantity of linkages among the various indigenous groups, as well as expanded their linkages with international organizations and third-state actors. These networks were reinforced by the gradual infiltration of Bolivia's peoples into state government.

The relative autonomy of Bolivia's indigenous groups signals a clear power shift away from the state. Power in Bolivia is now split between the indigenous groups and the Santa Cruz economic hub. Despite the increase of indigenous power, Bolivia's indigenous movements are not unified. Differences among them still exist based on local interests (urban or rural) and competing views of modernization, representation, local governance, land use and government protection of markets. These differences fuel suspicion among the groups and prevent complete unification, except in the direst of circumstances. These differences also provide political opportunities for other groups, such as Bolivia's eastern business sector and the military, to take advantage of in pursuit of their own particular interests.

## About the Author

Major R.J. Schmidt, USMC, is a Regional Studies -Western Hemisphere student at the Naval Postgraduate School. His research areas include both indigenous groups and insurgency in Latin America. He has served in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. The views expressed in this article are his own and do not reflect the U.S. government, military, or other institutional affiliation.

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